

EXPLORE NATURE IN STARLIGHT

Torgnon offers you total immersion in nature in the mountains even at night, as several sites are easily accessible and can be safely travelled even in the dark, accompanied by an environmental excursion guide and equipped with basic devices (e.g., forehead torch light).

Humans are not accustomed to finding their way in the dark, especially in a natural environment. Sight is penalised while the other senses are sharpened to help understand the surroundings. This activates various sensory channels that are amplified when exposed to the multiple stimuli offered by the natural environment at night.

Hearing is doubtless the most stimulated sense. Ears are more perceptive than during the day (because sight is at a disadvantage); hence, you will hear a multitude of different sounds, ranging from environmental sounds, such as the wind moving tree branches, the noise of your steps (which gives an idea of your location with rustling grass in the field, crackling branches that have fallen in the undergrowth, pebbles on the path), but especially sounds that tell us about the intense life that animates nature at night.

Many animals leave their dens and seek food at dusk and at night, protected by the shadows. Nature then resounds with their voices and calls, and even with the slight noise of their movements amidst branches or on the ground.

In this situation a forehead torch light will help you see, though it is extremely focused. A beam of light can light up limited areas and certain aspects of the environment. You can even rely on touch to better understand some signs left by wild animals in the environment, and touch will enable you to perceive, for instance, the characteristics of trees in the woodland. The expanded lamina of broad-leaved trees or the leaves of conifers modified into needles, which can be hard or soft, long or short, forming bunches or present in a precise number on the branches will help to determine the species or the group of plants.

The descriptive sheets that follow enlarge on the main animals/categories of animals that inhabit nature in the Torgnon area at night, indicating the sensory stimuli associated with their presence (direct contact or signs of presence). For every activated sense, you will find indications of the most characteristic direct and indirect forms of contact; the latter are bound to physical and/or behavioural peculiarities that can be easily observed.



NIGHT-TIME BIRDS OF PREY

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Night-time birds of prey are birds of prey that have adapted to night life, both from an anatomical and behavioural standpoint. The perception of their presence in a natural environment, at the time of greatest activity of the day, namely at night, is entrusted to the senses. Knowing about the main physical characteristics and most significant habits will prepare you for field exploration at night.

HEARING

- **Song**
- **Sounds of an attack on prey**

Song

Song is often the only element that allows to perceive the presence of night-time birds of prey. The Boreal Owl emits a prolonged "u-pu-pu-pu-pu" sound in rapid sequence with a crescendo, especially late in winter and early spring. The Eurasian Pigmy Owl emits a nuptial song comprising a rapid sequence of short fluted whistles "più". The Tawny Owl issues a creepy broken "uuùooo-ùo-ùo-ùo-uuùooo" with a shaky finale, and also a "chic-uic" and "chieek" sound. The Eurasian Eagle Owl sings from a high perch, emitting a disyllabic, baritone and bass "uùu-oo" that can be heard at a far distance, while the Eurasian Scops Owl emits a monotonous and unmistakable "tiùu" that is repeated at regular intervals and often uninterruptedly.

Hunting technique

Seated on a perch, the night-time bird of prey uses its hearing to define the precise point where the prey is located. Before launching an attack, it evaluates the best way to make the most of the success of its hunt. Once ready, it silently launches itself on the prey.

Active defence behaviours

When a bird of prey has to defend its territory or if there is some danger in its vicinity, it puffs up the feathers to look bigger and starts "ticking" with the beak as a sign of warning.

NIGHT-TIME ADVENTURES

DETAILED INFORMATION

SIGHT, LIMITED TO THE LIGHT BEAM OF THE TORCH

- **Identify signs of presence, such as pellets, feathers under a perch, nests in cavities.**

Preening

Birds spend several hours preening, which means cleaning and smoothing their feathers with the beak, using an oily water-proofing fluid produced by a gland located above the tail. Scrolling, instead, is used to arrange the feathers after the previous operation.

Hairballs

Since they have no teeth, they swallow their meals whole. The regurgitation of indigestible parts (e.g., fur, feathers, shells, exoskeleton of insects, fish bones, reptile scales, plant fragments and yet others, depending on the diet) is an excellent solution to the problem of their elimination. The mass of undigested substances is compacted by movements of the stomach and expelled from the mouth in the form of a ball-like mass, the pellet.

SIGHT, FOR DIRECT VISUAL CONTACT

This is extremely difficult because if an animal feels threatened, it will adopt passive defence behaviours to avoid being noticed. Mimetic feathers and the capacity to keep feathers tightly wrapped around the body make the figure smaller and practically invisible.

Main anatomical features

Generally, they have a large head, short neck and a typical large facial disk that channels sounds to the large ears. The actual strength of night-time birds of prey, in sensory terms, is their hearing. The head can rotate by 270° to intercept sounds and identify the prey even at a distance. Eyes stand out on the head. Despite having an iris that can rapidly adapt to light conditions by expanding or narrowing, and a retina that can perceive and intensify the scarce light present, functioning like a night-time visor, they do not suffice to guarantee precise identification of the prey, especially if it is small. Sight is, therefore, only used for movements.

TOUCH, IF YOU FIND FEATHERS OR PELLETS

Relying on touch allows to perceive the softness of the feathers, which make the flight more silent. The particular type of feathers contributes to eliminate the vortexes of air that are created on the wings during flight, thus acting as a silencer.

When you find pellets by using the sense of touch, you can identify the undigested parts inside them to understand what was eaten (insects, small mammals, etc.).

TYPICAL SPECIES

- Boreal Owl (*Aegolius funereus*)
- Eurasian Pigmy Owl (*Glaucidium passerinum*)
- Tawny Owl (*Strix aluco*)
- Eurasian Scops Owl (*Otus scops*)
- Eurasian Eagle-Owl (*Bubo bubo*)

BEST OBSERVATION PERIOD

All year round.
From dusk to dawn (some animals
can also be observed during the day, such
as, for instance, the squirrel and the fox).
Prevalently in the woodland.

MAMMALS

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Several small, medium and large mammals are mostly active at night, though they are not specifically suited for night life. Hence they have less evident adaptation methods compared, for instance, to night-time birds of prey or to the bat. They merely find that the night is safest as it reduces contact with humans to a minimum, allowing them to move freely, looking for food. The sensory stimuli that allow to perceive their presence in the natural environment where they move are particularly based on their cry or call, and on other signs of their presence (e.g., footprints, nests and dens, antlers, excrements, etc.), that can be seen with a forehead torch light.

HEARING

- **Cry and call**
- **Sounds related to their movement and to their night-time activity**

The wolf's howl

Having returned to Valle d'Aosta after about a decade, the wolf can be unmistakably recognised by its howl, which it uses to communicate at a distance with members of a pack or to threaten a rival wolf in order to avoid a potential battle.

The individuals howl for various reasons. The solitary wolf howls often to obtain answers and, hence, information from packs that are present in the surroundings. Dominating wolves (called alpha) emit brief howls with very low tones; medium ranking individuals howl and also whine, yelp, growl and bark to create the vocal illusion of a much larger pack. The wolf cubs practice by learning the specific howl of their rank.

Life on the trees

The movements, however furtive, among the branches of trees at night betray the presence of animals.

The dormouse

It builds its nest among the branches and stays there in the active season, sleeping during the day and going out only at night in search of food. It is a noisy animal that is not discrete at all. Besides their movement, their typical call, which recalls snoring with a final whistle, can be heard from the thick of the trees.

SIGHT, LIMITED TO THE LIGHT BEAM OF THE TORCH

- **Finding signs of presence, such as footprints, nests and dens, excrements, antlers, tufts of fur, etc.**

The badger's den

The badger is a large shy mustelid, whose habits are associated with dusk. It digs a den underground with long tunnels and chambers.

The excavation activity characterises it to such an extent that every part of its body is moulded based on this activity, namely strong body, short strong legs with large nails that are suitable for digging. Holes located outside the den act as a lavatory, where the badger usually leaves its excrements.

The hare's footprints (common and variable)

Especially on muddy or snow covered soil, you can clearly distinguish the footprints of the hare that moves with its typical gait of leaping with the front legs balanced one behind the other, while the hind legs are always balanced in front of the front ones, in a parallel position. Hence, the footprint leaves the typical Y shape.

The remains of the squirrel's lunch

Despite not being a strictly night-time animal, the squirrel leaves evident signs of its presence under the trees where it lives. By feeding on seeds located inside the pine cones, it literally tears them to shreds, leaving large quantities of shells and the remains of the pine cone at the foot of plants. The pine cones of the red spruce deprived of their scales by squirrels have a shaggy appearance with a fringed base and a tuft of scales at the top.

The fox's excrements

The fox is a territorial animal that is prevalently active at dusk and at night. Its remarkable adaptation capacity encourages it to also visit anthropised areas. Even along the most visited trails you can easily find the fox's excrements deposited in visible points, such as stones or tree trunks, to mark the territory.

The faeces of the fox look like dark sausages, rounded at one extremity and pointed at the other. They measure approx. 5-8 cm and often contain undigested remains (e.g., hazelnuts, fur, etc.).

The deer's antlers

Every year, at the end of the mating season, the deer lose their branched antlers, which are their special feature; hence, visitors might find this special object. The antlers of the deer are unique bony formations because, every year, they grow, fall and then grow again. The male's antlers are a physical sign based on which females choose their partner during the mating season. It can vary in size, depending on age and diet, and every year grows back identical to the previous one with the same arrangement of branches and bifurcations, with the addition of a new stump that is a few centimetres long.

On sighting an adult between February and March, we can notice two stumps on the forehead. These are the scars of the fallen antlers and the formation point of the new ones.

The moulting process of the roe

The roe has a coat that undergoes two moulting processes every year. The young ones have a dark brown coat that is speckled along the back and the sides. In about two months these patches disappear to make room for the reddish summer coat, which is similar to the adult one. The spring moulting process (between April and June) conveys a bright reddish-brown colour and causes massive falling of tufts of the winter coat. The autumn moulting process, between September and October (November), is less evident and faster, and causes the fur to thicken and grow longer, acquiring a greyish-brown colour.

SIGHT, FOR DIRECT VISUAL CONTACT

When evening falls, at the edge of the woods one can notice animals that come out at dusk, like the roe. The smallest cervid of European fauna has a slender body, the typical physical features of a jumper and scarce sexual dimorphism (males and females are very similar, except for the shape of the anal mirror, the white posterior region, which is kidney/bean-shaped in males and presents an inverted heart shape in females). It visits even anthropised environments (cultivated areas, fields and woods), preferring areas where traditional farming is practised that respects the environment. The species, anyhow, maintains a close bond with the woods because, despite the abundance of food in open areas, they do not meet their need for protection. Indeed, the most important phases of their biological cycle take place in the woods.

TYPICAL SPECIES

- Fox
- Wolf
- Badger
- Dormouse (garden dormouse/hazel dormouse)
- Deer
- Roe
- Hare
- Squirrel

BEST OBSERVATION PERIOD

All year round.
From dusk to dawn.
**In woodland areas/grassy clearings/
fields/anthropised areas.**

EFFECTIVE RULES TO OBSERVE ANIMALS IN NATURE (DURING THE DAY AND AT NIGHT)

Do not go too close

If you try to go too close to an animal in nature to take a photo or to have a better view, you will only cause it stress and disturbance, inducing it to abandon its occupations and flee. If an animal shows signs of nervousness, move away and use the binoculars or a telephoto lens, while maintaining a certain distance.

Seek a good observation point and be patient

Concealing your presence for instance among trees or behind a rock helps not to be seen. A good dose of patience is required but if you know to wait and limit the disturbance to a minimum, you will be rewarded.

First study

Study carefully and prepare your excursion in nature by reading and studying about the animal you want to observe or photograph. Knowing its habits, behaviours and, especially, its preferred areas will make the search, observation and identification easier and more rewarding.

Choose your clothing carefully

For long waits you will need warm clothes and, especially, avoid perfume and cigarettes. The animals would instantly perceive a foreign presence and steer clear of you.

Silence is precious

Moving silently is essential. Avoid clothes that make a noise when they get crushed, and Velcro systems. If you need to speak, do so softly. Check your enthusiasm at the time of visual contact. If you raise your voice at the sight of an animal, you will make it flee immediately and all your efforts would have been pointless.

Do not touch or feed the animals

Trying to touch a wild animal is dangerous both for you and for the animal. Small animals that are apparently alone have not been abandoned by the mother. It is a normal strategy and their parents are probably nearby waiting for you to leave in order to feed the young ones. Never feed wild animals. You risk interrupting their normal behaviour without counting on the fact that human food is not suitable for their natural diet.

Do not pick up anything

Do not pick up anything and do not move natural objects or animals because, thus doing, you might remove material from the cycle of nutrients of the earth or interfere with the territorial markings of certain species. Never move animals, plants or fish from one site to another because you could cause considerable damage by transporting illness, unnatural predation and competition.

Do not use decoying devices

Using decoying devices and various imitations to obtain a response from animals can interrupt the natural flow of habits of the wild fauna; moreover, they can be annoying for other visitors. There is evidence that using recorded or manual decoying devices to attract wild fauna can cause stress for some species, interrupting the courting, nesting and feeding process. Learn to recognise and understand the call of wild fauna and bird song, or simply listen to and enjoy the various sounds that surround you.

Do not follow the animals

Do not follow or run behind animals. Forcing an animal to move or change its behaviour is unacceptable and forbidden in all protected areas. Learn to anticipate their movements and stay away from their path!

Be grateful

Appreciate what you see. Sighting of wild fauna is not guaranteed, and you might not see what you were hoping to see. But do not be disappointed. Savour the pleasure experienced for what you saw, even if it might seem little. Observing animals in their kingdom is not like watching a TV documentary; certain visions can last a second but with some luck, patience, good sense and respect, you will have the possibility of enjoying fantastic moments.